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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTIONS #9: PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFULS LOOK
TO 2008 AND BEYOND

Classified By: Economic and Political Counselor Michael Meigs for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) This is the 9th cable in a series reporting on the Dominican Republic's May 16 congressional and municipal elections:

(C) Presidential Hopefuls Look to 2008 and Beyond

(U) As the Dominican Republic prepares to hold congressional and municipal elections May 16, prominent persons in the major political parties are gauging their chances to launch candidacies against President Leonel Fernandez two years hence. A Gallup poll this month (septel, election series #8) measured the current popularity of some of these leaders; others are working behind the scenes or planning for the long term.

(U) The presidential aspirants will adjust their expectations based on the outcome of the mid-term elections, but the resulting inter-party balance of power will not necessarily indicate what the situation will be in 2008. Also, the ruling PLD's Bloque Progresista and the opposition PRD-PRSC Gran Alianza Nacional may not survive as coalitions in their present form until 2008. The successful presidential candidate will probably come from one of the big three parties.

The Ruling PLD

(C) President Leonel Fernandez (PLD) has declined to comment on his intentions for 2008. In early 2006 at a political rally in the northern coastal town of Nagua he commented that four years were not enough to achieve the party's agenda, causing a stir in the press. The presidential press spokesman promptly denied that the reference was to Fernandez as a candidate. In the Gallup poll Fernandez was viewed favorably by the greatest number of poll respondents, 73%, followed by former vice president Jaime David Fernandez Mirabal (PLD, no relation), 62%. Both had low unfavorable ratings, 24% and 22%. Secretary of the Presidency Danilo Medina, the president's chief of staff, followed with a positive response from 53% vs. 26% negative. Both Medina and Fernandez Mirabal have been rivals of the president within the PLD and could promote their own candidacies in 2008. At present these rivalries are muted by Fernandez's continuing popularity.

(C) Medina controls much of the PLD machinery and has placed his people in key positions, but can't hold a candle to Fernandez as a charismatic personality. In 2000, when Fernandez was barred by the constitution from running for a second term, Medina lost the presidential election to Hipolito Mejia by a wide margin. Barring any unforeseen disasters in the present Fernandez administration, he will probably run for a third term in 2008 -- an option permitted by a 2002 constitutional amendment -- and the PLD would be unlikely to pick Medina as the candidate over a proven two-time winner. The PLD rank-and-file look to Fernandez, not Medina, as their top party leader.

(SBU) Fernandez Mirabal, whose mother was one of the three legendary anti-Trujillo Mirabal sisters martyred in the 1950s, has remained aloof from the administration and much of the party. His considerable potential may ebb the longer he bides his time. His active and ambitious cousin, Congresswoman Minou Tavarez Mirabal, like Jaime David is not close either to Medina or to the President.

(SBU) Two younger PLD figures have entered the competition. Senator Jose Tomas Perez, representing the capital, did not compete for his party's senatorial nomination this time despite strong poll ratings and a widely admired record as a legislator. In an interview in weekly newspaper "Clave" on April 13, he announced he would "start to build a new presidential option within the PLD...not aimed against anyone in particular." An avowed man of principle, Perez has been criticized by PLD colleagues for being "too independent" and on occasion has differed publicly with the administration. To get the party behind him, he would have to be more of a team player and cultivate relations with party boss Medina.

(SBU) Another highly competent and popular figure, Attorney General Francisco Dominguez Brito, has built his reputation on strengthening the justice system and fighting corruption. He is favored to win election as a senator from Santiago and is considered to be "presidenciable." Both Perez and Dominguez Brito will be good alternatives for 2008 in the event President Fernandez does not run.

(SBU) A PLD elder, Interior Secretary Franklin Almeida, has competed before for the party's nomination and still harbors hopes. But his confrontational style, on display since February in his repeated criticisms of the nation's municipalities for alleged wasteful spending, counts against him, as does his past as a militant leftist (in the 1960s-1970s).

(SBU) Among the top palace advisors, Medina's counterpart on the economic side, Technical Secretary of the Presidency Temistocles Monts, is no

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politician. He rarely engages in public political discourse, as distinct from policy statements in his crucial areas of responsibility. Presidential Legal Adviser Cesar Pina Toribio has much more of a political bent and often voices opinions to the press, including doubts about the independence and credibility of the Central Election Board (JCE). But he lacks a public following; at a minimum he would need to hold a ministry to become a presidential contender. He is one of the possible candidates to succeed Attorney General Francisco

Dominguez Brito, if as expected the AG wins election to the Senate.

The Opposition PRD

(SBU) The PLD currently benefits from unity of command, but the main opposition leaders since their 2004 election defeat have been divided and, with some exceptions, relatively unpopular. Among the PRD's chronically squabbling leaders, ex-president Hipolito Mejia is by all accounts still the strongest within the party, but his favorable rating in the public opinion poll was a mere 24%, compared with 72% unfavorable. Aside from occasional statements, he has not played a prominent role in this election campaign or in the negotiation of the PRD-PRSC alliance.

(SBU) Embassy PRD contacts say Mejia is interested in running again for president, and some PRD legal experts -- contrary to others -- parse the wording of the 2002 constitutional amendment to permit him to do so. The amendment, passed by his PRD supporters to enable him to run for reelection in 2004, appears to allow only one attempt by a sitting president at reelection. Beyond this impediment, Mejia would have to overcome the unpopularity that has dogged him since the last year of his presidency, beset by financial crisis and accusations of corruption.

(SBU) That said, the PRD is the strongest opposition party and its candidate is likely to be the most potent adversary to Fernandez in 2008. Former public works secretary Miguel Vargas Maldonado (PRD), a successful and wealthy businessman, has been working for more than a year to promote his own pre-candidacy for president and organize a nationwide campaign network. Some PRD leaders, including members of Congress, have told the Embassy they support his aspirations. His demonstrated initiative and energy have given him a head start over other contenders, and it is fair to assume he is using his abundant

personal resources to further his cause. To Embassy's knowledge, no one has accused Vargas of corruption in his previous government job, a traditional opportunity for illicit enrichment.

(SBU) PRD President and Senator Ramon Alburquerque, who was a pre-candidate for the nation's presidency in 2004, undoubtedly plans to try again in 2008. A veteran of more than 15 years in the Senate, he is well known to politicians, and in his party leadership role is seen and heard almost daily in the media criticizing the government and opining on the controversies of the day. He has earned a reputation in Congress for confrontation, and some party colleagues regard him as self-promoting. If Mejia encounters insuperable obstacles to running again, Alburquerque could emerge as a compromise presidential candidate -- after overcoming competition from other PRD faction chiefs.

(SBU) The PRD has at least one younger leader to watch, Secretary General Orlando Jorge

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Mera. Son of former president Salvador Jorge Blanco (1982-1986), Jorge has cast himself as part of a new, more modern generation. Author of a weekly newspaper column promoting reforms in the Dominican political and civic culture, Jorge also negotiated the electoral alliance with his even younger counterpart, PRSC Secretary General Victor Gomez Casanova. For months the two frequently appeared in news photos, announcing the latest developments. Jorge Mera is likely to pass up a candidacy in 2008 election, finish his four-year term as secretary general, run for the Senate in 2010, and compete

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for the presidency in 2012.

(SBU) Other PRD elders, former vice president Milagros Ortiz Bosch and Rafael "Fello" Subervi Bonilla, still have significant followings in the party and are active in directing the current PRD campaign, but are unlikely to win a presidential nomination in 2008. They slipped in public esteem after the bruising nomination battle of 2004 and, despite periodic public statements, have not recovered. Ortiz Bosch has nearly equal favorable and unfavorable poll rating, 46% vs. 44%. Subervi got a 50% unfavorable poll score, far more than his 32% favorable.

The Opposition PRSC

(U) The Refomista Party has been struggling to survive since 2004, and big factions have broken away to join the government or support its candidates in this election. The party's weakness will handicap any of the PRSC figures who aims to run for president. In the event the current alliance endures until 2008, the common candidate would probably come from the PRD.

(SBU) Nonetheless, of the 14 national figures included in the poll, former presidential candidate Eduardo Estrella got the third highest favorable response, 57% -- behind only President Fernandez and former Vice President Fernandez

Mirabal. Estrella likes to describe himself as "the moral conscience" of the PRSC, and he quietly boasts of having been the only public works secretary in Dominican history who "didn't steal a cent." Any hyperbole aside, he looks and acts the part of Mr. Clean. Regrettably, corruption is not at the top of Dominican voters' most pressing concerns, and Estrella as a public speaker lacks punch or charisma. He retains some influence within his fractured party, but is unlikely to win its nomination again.

(C) Amable Aristy Castro, secretary general of the Dominican Municipal League, handles a big fund for the Dominican government, distributing as much as 11 billion pesos (346 million US dollars) in revenue sharing to city governments.

He strongly promoted the PRD-PRSC alliance, and its successful conclusion was viewed as a victory for him against Estrella and other reformistas who preferred different arrangements. Aristy has earned a reputation for using money to leverage political advantage, and even leaders in his own party dislike his tactics. Some comments suggest he may have been involved in money laundering, and he has denounced as politically motivated the opening by the government anti-corruption office of his management of the Municipal League. A canny and rich businessman, who has twice been president of the Dominican Senate, Aristy is promoting himself as a candidate for 2008. But the opinion poll gave him an unfavorable rating of 42%, compared with 33% favorable. In response, he told the press on April 24 that he expects to be elected Senator of Altagracia province by an 80% margin and that his daughter Karina will enjoy the same measure of support for re-election as the mayor of Higüey, the provincial seat. Aristy's image will make it very difficult for him to gain a presidential nomination from a major party.

(SBU) PRSC President Federico "Quique" Antun Batlle tried to steer the PRSC into an alliance with the ruling PLD (see daily for March 2); the opposite outcome detracted from his clout. His PRSC colleagues generally view him as a competent manager of routine party affairs, but not as presidentialiable. His business as a breeder of fighting cocks, while moderately lucrative, also limits his appeal among urban and more educated voters. In the poll, he got only 29% favorable responses vs. 41% unfavorable.

(SBU) Senator Jose "Joscito" Hazim Frappier, Estrella's former running mate, undoubtedly will seek another chance in 2008, but lacks the necessary national prominence. A sugar grower in San Pedro de Macoris, he is closely identified with the interests of the sugar industry, a small and diminishing sector in the nation's economy. His poll ratings: 37% favorable, 32% unfavorable. He is currently embarrassed by the fact that the banking authorities are dunning his firm for repayment of big loans made to it by the collapsed BANINTER. Nonetheless, he is running for reelection to the Senate this year.

(SBU) Two younger reformistas have presidential potential: Representative Victor "Ito" Bisono, leader of a sub-bloc of 12-15 legislators, and PRSC

secretary general Vctor Gmez

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Casanova. Bisono is often mentioned as a possible successor to Alfredo Pacheco as speaker of the lower house of Congress this year, if Pacheco wins his election race to become mayor of Santo Domingo. A shoo-in for reelection as a congressman; Bisono and his spouse come from wealthy business families. If he becomes speaker, he might aspire to a presidential candidacy in 2008; otherwise he will wait until 2012.

(SBU) Gomez Casanova, at age 29, already has several feathers in his cap: as a fast-talking commentator on the most-listened-to radio talk show, senior party official, negotiator of the opposition alliance, and son of Victor Gomez Bergs, a former minister under Balaguer and now candidate for the Senate. Gomez Casanova will punch other tickets before seeking the presidency: he might run for representative or senator in 2010, then try for a presidential run in 2012 or later.

Other Parties

(SBU) Of the approximately 19 recognized minor parties, only one -- the newly established Revolutionary Social Democratic Party (PRSD) of Hatuey De Camps -- stands any chance of fielding a nationally prominent presidential candidate in 2008. De Camps held senior jobs in the administration of Jorge Blanco and subsequently served for many years as secretary general and then president of the PRD. As the only PRD leader who refused to accept Mejia's ill-fated reelection bid in 2004, Hatuey earned a measure of public respect -- a reputation he has striven to reinforce with the new party he founded after breaking with the PRD in February 2005. But he alienated many "perredeistas" by his bold move, and his latest poll score was a dismal 54% negative, 29% positive. He aims to build a voter base in 2006 in preparation for 2008. Despite his oratorical prowess and some success in recruiting attractive candidates for his "black bull" party, he is unlikely to become president. An analogy: Juan Bosch broke from the PRD in 1973 and founded the PLD, but it did not win the presidency until 1996 with younger leadership.

(SBU) Former police chief Pedro de Jesus Candelier, renowned for a rise in extrajudicial killings by police during his tenure, has launched a "movement" as a vehicle for his presidential ambitions, the Alianza Popular con Candelier. He is a one-issue candidate who appeals to Dominicans' rising concern over crime and symbolizes -- without exactly saying so -- harsh corrective measures. His remarkable 50% favorable poll responses vs. only 32% negative signify the salience of this issue, but little more. He tries to soften his image with populist rhetoric about reducing poverty and corruption. Candelier has no known party organization, intellectual aptitude or significant sources of funding, and his pre-candidacy at this point is a trial balloon.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

13. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted

at our SIPRNET web site
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo>) along with
extensive other material.
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